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THE JOURNEY TO TWILLINGATE

Niels Peter Juel Larsen

Translated from Danish by Jette Mez

Preface

The bloody slaughter of newborn seal pups, north of Newfoundland, out there at the ice front. Everybody is familiar with the pictures of the small white baby seals, looking like cuddly animals, whose skulls are crushed by heartless men.

Greenpeace and the "National Fund for Animal Welfare" have protested against this excessive slaughter which threatened the entire harp and hooded seal population with extinction.

They finally succeeded. For the past three years no seal pups have been caught at the ice front, not even in St.Lawrence Bay or on Jan Mayen. The market for sealskins has almost disappeared.

But there is another story, a story which has not been told until now. Democratic Europe has completely forgotten to listen to the other side of the story concerning the baby seals, the story of the hunters, those supposedly "heartless" men.

It is the story of centuries of poverty and oppression, of small isolated communities overwhelmed by Greenpeace, which are only now speaking out, telling their side of the story of the seal hunt.

The Journey to Twillingate is a story about these fishermen, their lives, their relationship with nature

and their daily drudgery earning a living. It is a report about the meeting of a Danish reporter whose attitude was strongly influenced by Greenpeace, with the fishermen, and his trying to keep an open mind..

For it is not easy to be an animal lover and a humanitarian at the same time.

Niels Peter Juel Larsen

We are landing in fog in Newfoundland, a thick milky-white fog, and I can hardly wait to see what is down below. Only about 100 meters above ground the Newfoundland countryside begins to emerge slowly: similar to a Norwegian landscape with fir trees, rocks, damp with frosty-wet rain, and full of large American cars.

In St.Johns the temperature is 0°C and the wind is blowing through the pouring rain which is falling on the large black-edged piles of snow, the trees and the shrubs, the lampposts and power lines, covering everything with a thin layer of ice.

Next morning, I wake up in the hotel groping my way to the bathroom to have a shower. No light. The bathroom is so dark that I cannot even make out the mirror. Shortly afterwards there is a knock on the door and a woman's voice says shyly:"It's all right!"

"What is all right?" I ask, rather bad-tempered.

"It's just all right", repeats the voice.

"That there is no light?"

"Yes, that's all right", answers the voice.

So we have no power. It is cold during the rest of the day and the following day. Cold rooms, cold food, cold water.

During the night the pouring rain has turned into a sleet storm. For kilometers streetlights and power lines are collapsing under the ever increasing ice, 7 to 8 inches

thick. It will be weeks before the power is restored on the whole island. The hotel has an emergency supply, the rest of St.Johns is gray, dark, cold.

In the evening Kirk Smith appears, the manager of the "Canadian Sealers Association", to give me some information about the conditions.
A balanced use of the marine resources is their axiom, and he adds:"An axiom which even Greenpeace have nothing against".

He represents the local hunters, the "landsmen", not the large commercial shipping companies which are hunting, or, rather, used to hunt, the white seal pups, up at the ice front, north of Newfoundland, the local fishermen who go on the seal hunt in their small fishing cutters and have a small income from catching "beaters". And beaters are not little white seal pups, beaters are young seals, six weeks old or older, almost fully grown. They are the basis of existence for these fishermen which is threatened by Greenpeace and by import bans by the EEC for products from seal pups. A ban on imports which was introduced in February 1983 and practically destroyed the market for seal pelts. The entire market, not only the market for baby seal pelts.

He begins to tell me about the hard life of these fishermen, in small isolated fishing communities further north, in Twillingate and elsewhere. He talks to me as if I had never met a fisherman in my life and I react strongly by telling him, as if I knew it all, that these fishermen seem

to be like the Danish fishermen on the West coast who are very religious, have a very strict lifestyle, are suspicious of strangers and full of feelings of inferiority.

"You have described them quite accurately!" he continues, in a more conciliatory tone but, in my opinion, still rather pompously:"They are basically like the sea which provides their livelihood, ever changing and treacherous, but also hard and rugged like the rocks on which the waves of the Atlantic break". "Hmm", I mutter, agreeing.

During the last few years he has succeeded in changing the resentment and the feelings of inferiority of these fishermen into a positive force. Especially debates on TV were a great success. "There is nothing more genuine on a TV screen than a fisherman speaking openly and directly, unselfconsciously, about his life experiences".

I nod and keep my prejudices to myself. What do I really know? A European who is really prejudiced, consciously or subconsciously, by the Greenpeace publicity against the slaughter of baby seals. The fluffy white helpless seal pups whose skulls are crushed on the ice by heartless men. Small newborn white animals which cannot escape their murderers, because they cannot yet live in the water. Despite my desire to have an open mind regarding the opinions of the fishermen, these pictures are deeply engraved in my conscience and make me uneasy. And I find it hard to see any difference between the great slaughter of the seal pups out there on the ice front and the hunt for young seals by the fishermen with rifles.

Kirk Smith continues. Greenpeace and similar organizations have destroyed the basis of existence of the local fishermen. A few years ago fishermen could still count on being able to get one third of their annual income from the seal hunt, about $ 3 to 4,000 per man.

This has now become impossible. The market is ruined and the price of sealskins has dropped to half, from $ 32.00 to $ 16.00. And all this because people mistake the pelts of grown seals for those of the seal pups.

The fur company Corino in Dildo which is Norwegian-owned, is the only buyer of seal pelts in Newfoundland, and the owners have been intimidated to such an extent by the protest movement that they will only buy 60,000 skins, and these only at half-price, even though the official quota is set at 180,000 seals.

"By the way, during the last two years no baby seals have been caught", he adds, "despite the fact that the environmentalists still maintain the opposite, as, for example, in England this year. It makes one wonder whether they are only interested in money. It is so very easy to collect money with these white baby seals".

"You must have seen the photograph of Brigitte Bardot with a baby seal in her arms?"

"Hmm" I answer.

"Everybody here knows that this is not possible. She must be holding a stuffed baby seal. A real seal pup is not a cuddly little animal. It bites!"

There is a weak emergency light in the bar. Outside it is raining so hard that it seems to be wet even between

each droplet of rain. When they hit the ground they turn into ice and convert the landscape into a gallery of naturalistic ice sculpture. Trees, fences, shrubs, stones, grass and the needles of the fir trees are covered by several inches of thick ice, clear as glass.

In Twillingate they are waiting for an offshore wind, they are thinking and speaking of nothing else: a good south-easterly storm which would move the ice pack away from the coast. In St.Johns the harbour is free of ice, but here, 500 miles further north, the ice is piled high on the coast as far as the eye and the binoculars can see - drift-ice, about 80 kilometers wide, which blocks the small fishing harbours.

Twillingate is located at the furthest north-eastern corner of Newfoundland and is one of the centres of the seal hunt, a small fishing village of 2,000 inhabitants, protected by a narrow fjord.

Even now, at the end of April, harbour and fjord are frozen, covered with ice, the flat rocky countryside is rusty-red, wind-swept, with occasional low fir growth. On the northern slopes are deep snowdrifts, the grass is gray, long and dead. Small white, yellow or salmon red houses, their roofs painted fir green or sky blue, are scattered along the cliffs of the fjords, surrounding the harbour like small splashes of colour.

At the mouth of the fjord is the floe ice, shimmering white, the open water holes grey-black... the clouds are hanging low... the light is cold and white and sharp...

Newfoundland lies at the same latitude as France. If the Gulf stream didn't flow 200 miles to the South, vines would grow in Twillingate. Instead, the Labrador current leaves the island cold, foggy, brown, bare, infertile, raw.

Slowly, the fishermen are getting desperate. At this time of year they usually have been at the seal hunt for at least a month, except this year and last year, when the floe ice blocked the coast until late in April, too.

It is the hardest Winter in 10 years. The wind is blowing incessantly from the North, sometimes veering to the North-East, but immediately backing to the North. The ice is rafting against the coast and it is impossible to go out in the larger fishing cutters.

As in the old days, many fishermen have started to go out on the ice again, dragging their small motorboats to the open water, shooting seals when they come up for air.

Others go to Longpoint daily, the cape with the light-house, which is a few hundred meters above sea level, to check the condition of the ice, to talk, to meet other people.

Today, on Thursday of Easter Week, there is an endless/ constant traffic of arriving and departing delivery vans. It is morning, there is almost no wind under a hot stifling Mediterranean sun, and the ice is melting everywhere, almost silently, with small crackling, gurgling sounds.

During the silence between the arrivals and departures of the cars, far-away rifle shots can be heard or the resounding roar of a motorboat breaking through the thin night ice.

The fishermen are standing at the fence and are scanning the ice with their binoculars, they are looking for seals and for other fishermen out there, near the black open water.

"An offshore wind has been forecast!" one of the older fishermen whom I later get to know as Captain Peter Troake, the eldest of an old family of Twillingate, is one of the most enthusiastic, always commenting on what is happening on the ice, pointing out and including the others, as if it were a play taking place out there, the drama of the hunt.

He has sighted a seal through the binoculars, but the others cannot see it. He says stubbornly:"It is right down there. Can you really not see it?"
"Can't you see it? Directly over there, behind the ice floe!"
His neighbour shakes his head.
"Now it is coming up for the fourth time, and the guys down there still haven't seen it!" "It must be a bird", says a neighbour.
"Damn it, this is no bird. If it were a bird, I could see its feathers."
Peter Troake is angry:"How come the guys down there can't see the seal?"

There is a certain happy anticipation among the fishermen, everybody is excited. The wind is slowly veering to the East, and south-easterly winds are forecast for the end of the week, offshore winds.

Peter Troake's neighbour is worried about the people in the lighthouse on Fogo Island. For over a month they have been isolated from the rest of the world, and their food supply must be running low.

"Rubbish", answers Peter Troake. "Today, if they are running out of something, they can just call the coastguard. They will come over, by helicopter".

Even though this answer seems logical, his neighbour is still worried. "But this isn't the way it used to be", adds Peter Troake.

Instead, he talks directly into the microphone, about the idiots from Greenpeace. I think he assumes that I am one of them and that he has to enlighten me.

"They are simply too stupid, these people from Greenpeace. They do not care whether people are killed, but if we hunt a seal we get an earful. Just think of the many babies who are killed in the US by abortion! And these are babies, not seal pups!"

He cites the usual arguments: If the seals become too numerous they will eat up all the fish. A seal eats seven kilos of fish every day, and not just bad fish! Imagine what would happen if there were millions and millions of seals.

"In a few years there would be no more fish!"

Perhaps? Perhaps not! are my thoughts.

Who really knows about the balance of nature today, after it has been interfered with so much?

"The people from Greenpeace should be thinking of humanity. Just think of all the seal meat that could be given to the starving people in the Third World. We are not idiots, after all".

His anger is gone, he gets the binoculars out again to search the sheet ice.

"Do you see that, out there?"

"Out there!"

(Peter Troake) "Do you see the black spot out there? Right out there!"

"It is the fourth seal I have seen today".

John Melindy's cutter is frozen fast in the ice of the harbour. A 60 ft. "longliner", which roughly corresponds to a medium-sized (Danish) fishing cutter. He bought his cutter new two years ago, but the deck is already brown with rust and long rusty streaks are running down the white painted wheel house.

It is not well maintained, I think, but it is not a luxury yacht, he points out.

The cutter cost $ 300,000.00 and it must go to the seal hunt this year, otherwise it will be auctioned off. He had calculated that he would be able to pay most of the interest and instalment payments with the income from the seal hunt, but last year was a very bad year, $ 6,000.00 gross instead

of the expected $ 50,000.00. $ 6,000.00 are not even enough to pay the interest, and the previous year he did not get to the seal hunt at all because the boat was delivered too late.

The cutter looks forlorn and seems to be deteriorating rapidly. The price of seal pelts has dropped 50% and he may as well forget the $ 3 - 4,000.00 profit on which he and his crew had counted. John Melindy is bitter. Greenpeace again! These people have no feeling for nature. "They give a shit for the welfare of the seals, they only have some vague ideas that wild animals must be protected. At the same time they are destroying the lives and existence of hundreds of fishermen from Newfoundland".

"And we, the fishermen, do not even catch the whitecoats. It's the big company ships from St.Johns or from Norway which sail to the ice front, to the whelping areas of the harp seal. The fishermen catch young seals, the "beaters", which are already in the water and have exchanged their white coat for a grey one and have long since been abandoned by their mothers."

"But these facts, too, are distorted by Greenpeace". He has had enough of being portrayed as a sadistic murderer of baby seals. He is a fisherman and would like to know the difference between catching seals and catching salmon. Killing is killing, whether it is salmon or seals.

This whole story started in the fifties, when the fishermen of the small northern fishing communities were able to buy longliners and to go to the seal hunt. This helped increase

their prosperity, and they do not want to give it up now. They do not want to go back to the old days when they had to walk or row out on the ice to get seal meat and seal skins when the family began to get hungry in the Spring.

They do not want to go back to the old days when they had to be grateful for being signed on on one of the large ships going to the ice front on the seal hunt. They do not want to go back to those days when they earned $ 20.00 under inhuman conditions while the big fur companies made large profits.

Old Melindy remembers those days. When he was still young he sailed on a big ship every Spring. That was during the times when the pelts were treated better than the crew, and when the crew fell asleep, exhausted, amidst the blood and the blubber.

And it was dangerous out there, on the ice. Men died there. Every Spring, some men disappeared on the ice. One of old Melindy's uncles perished during the terrible catastrophe of 1914 when 78 men from the steamship "Newfoundland" froze to death on the ice. They were left for two days on the ice because of a misunderstanding between two ships and because the mother ship had no radio. The shipping company did not want to spend money on a radio. After two days of storm most of the 78 victims were found frozen, immobilized in their position at the moment of death: a father, frozen, with his arms protectively around the

shoulders of his two sons, another father, holding his son in his arms, others frozen to death while dancing, or on their knees, praying to God.

There were many catastrophes on the ice. Every fisherman has lost relatives out there.

Fortunately, old Melindy was spared such a catastrophe. He remembers best the drudgery, they killed seals from 5 a.m. until dark, and in the evening they loaded the skins. He managed 140 young seals a day. A strong blow with the gaff on their head and they were dead ...

And he did not wound them or skin them alive, as Greenpeace claims. They were dead. Seal pups hardly move as long as they still have their white coats. They are still unable to live in the water. Only when they are three weeks old, do they get their grey fur and go into the water.

But like all the others, he, too, found it difficult to kill his first seal...

...The little white animal with the big eyes. "I cannot kill it", he thought. But after the first one it became automatic. His son felt the same way when killing his first seal pup. Every one of them felt the same way. He never killed suckling pups. He found that somehow perverse. As a rule he left them and killed pups which were on their own.

"What about the suckling young?" I ask. Usually, once all other pups had been killed on the ice floe and the mother had

disappeared, he went back to kill the young.
"After all, we do have feelings, we are not heathens. We are compassionate, too."

As soon as the mother left to look for food, he killed the pup.
"At this point nature is cruel", John Melindy interjects. "She abandons her young in any case when it is 10 days old, whether it can fend for itself or not".

With all the conscious and subconscious prejudices of a city dweller I ask myself what seals really mean to them. In many respects, seals and fish are the same to them.
"Is there no difference? Don't seals have a higher level of consciousness, aren't they more highly developed than fish?"

"They have no consciousness, only instincts. It is also incorrect to call seal pups babies. A baby is a human being". For him and the other fishermen the difference between man and animal is quite clear, like in the bible. Man has a soul, animals have none.
What do seals mean to you, I ask, not very precisely.
"Money!" is his answer, direct and to the point. "Money! What else?"

Greenpeace feeds the Europeans big fairytales, continues old Melindy. They are only interested in making money. That is why they use the photos of seal pups for their publicity.

"It is only because the small seal pup looks so cute, like a baby, and it cries just like a baby. We call it human crying. It sounded as if children were crying when the seal pups were crying out there on the ice"...

That is almost an admission or a realization how difficult it was to kill seal pups. The human crying.

For two years no seal pups have been caught. In spite of this Greenpeace continues to tell the English that this year seal pups are again being killed in Newfoundland, and encourages the consumers to boycott Canadian fish or to donate money. "And not necessarily in this order", says John Melindy. "We can see it on TV. They feed people in England lies only to make money. They do not care about the seals. How can such an organization have any credibility?"

Despite the low price for seal pelts, despite the Greenpeace publicity, they are all dreaming of going out there to the ice, to the sea.

"It is like a revelation when you are out there", says John Melindy. "It is as if time were standing still out there. It is fascinating, there is so much life, you can see all the mammals, the whales, the seals, the birds. You spend the day out there killing seals and in the evening, there is peace and quiet again and you know that you have worked hard and that the catch was good. You come home, refreshed, and soon, you want to go out there again".
Somehow, one thing justifies the other.

Thursday morning at 3.30 a.m. I am out there with Bruce Legge and his 14 year old twin sons, Terry and Tony, on the way across the fjord ice. The frosty morning ice sounds like a thousand small bells under our boots, and an icy-cold east

wind is blowing and the low greyish clouds out there in the East slowly begin to turn whitish-grey. I believe that yesterday he dragged his motorboat across the fjord ice close to the estuary especially for my benefit. Even though he wants to go seal hunting he thinks that the ice conditions are still too difficult and that the catch would be small.

But today the wind is blowing from the East and perhaps the ice is broken up.

Out here, at the mouth of the fjord, the ice is full of large water holes which are covered with only a thin layer of night ice.

It is hard to know where the firm ice begins and where the night ice ends, but Bruce obviously knows the way, and after we have dragged the boat along the firm ice for a short way we push it into the first water hole and climb aboard. I am not sure how we can motor through the ice, but Bruce starts the motor and we go at full speed, the stem raised high through the ice which is shattering like glass ...

...And I am sitting there, shivering, pretending to be an old seadog, afraid all the time that a sharp-edged piece of ice could penetrate the hull and we would sink in the black water.

At last, after a 15 minute ride in the racing boat, we reach firm ice and have to drag the boat again, across the last stretch to the Atlantic, across pack ice, piled high, more like a small path in the mountains, through ice

and snow until we finally reach the black water between fjord ice and floe ice.

It is disappointing.

The floe ice is hardly moving. From the inner edge of the ice to the floe ice, the distance is one kilometer at the most, one kilometer of black, ice-cold water with short choppy waves.

In the meantime the sun has risen, white and pale, behind a thin layer of cloud, and we are motoring towards the outer edge of the ice with Bruce now standing at the stem, looking for seals, and one of the twin boys, Tony, taking over the motor.

We see the first seal immediately. Tony spots it first. We all feel it: the sudden excitement created by a black seal head, far out in the choppy waves.

Tony speeds up and the bow rises up and races straight towards the head of the seal which remains in the waves, looking at us.

Now it is not cold any more out here, when Bruce shouts something to Tony and adjusts the speed. My concentration is suddenly absolute, hands and feet are warm again and alive. The feeling is so intense that I can see the head of the seal without binoculars, as if it were a close-up, in front of my eyes.

Idling, we approach the head of the seal. Bruce is lying down in the bow, aiming at the seal, but the seal suddenly dives. A moment later it surfaces again, about 50 meters further away.

We maintain the regular idling speed. I experience it all as if in slow motion. The seal is still there, its head among the waves. We are about 30 meters from it, but I can see it so clearly that I can almost count its whiskers.

Then Bruce fires.

At first, I do not know what happened, but then it seems as if the projectile had hit a wave, directly in front of the seal.

Anyhow, the seal is gone.

Bruce mumbles something, and we continue at half speed. Suddenly, the head of the seal reappears, a few meters from where it had observed us before, curious, as if it wanted to know exactly what was going on.

Bruce fires, and the seal is on its side, floating, hit in the head.

The sight of the dead seal disturbs me, this overwhelming transition from life to death, and I notice more and more sickening details, while Bruce, standing on the edge of the ice, slits the seal open with a long cut down the chest, complaining at the same time about the blunt knife. He shows me the lungs, two small heartshaped lungs, surprisingly small, considering the length of time a seal can remain under water. The intestines are lying on the ice in a steaming heap, looking like wet torn grey dishrags. The seal's skull has been completely shattered by the bullet, soft, rubber-like, the curve of the back of the head is blown off, something that must be the brain, has flowed out over

the ice, the consistency of sherbet icecream, the colour of black currants.

"It isn't all that cruel, is it?" says Bruce with a wide grin. I ask him cautiously what kind of bullets he is using. To me they look like dumdum bullets. "Bullets with a soft nose", he answers. "Make a small hole where they enter and a large one where they come out. Everybody uses them on the hunt, they kill instantly. They explode in the seal's head".

I realize that there are certain aspects of life of which I have only a very theoretical picture.

During the next few hours we vainly hunt several more careful seal heads which keep a certain distance, and now it is I who is the most eager, overcome by hunting fever, by the long waiting time, whilst we are looking for seal heads in the choppy waves, in the grip of exciting anticipation when we sight a seal and increase our speed. Now it is I who excitedly points and shouts:"There she is! There she is!"

During the morning the wind freshens, it is now coming from the North-East. The waves are getting higher and it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish the seal heads from the waves.

After killing the third seal around noon, Bruce gives up. "Have you seen enough" he asks kindly. "Yes", I answer.

I am cold and think of the other fishermen who stay out here until sundown and return home with perhaps six seals.

I do not envy them and would like to go ashore. Also, it is a long time since we saw the last seal and the waiting bores me. For Bruce it is quite different. Far too much gas has been used in relation to the catch.

On the way we pass old blood patches from the cutting up of seals on the edge of the ice. A large seagull drags a long seal intestine along, drawing ornamental patterns in blood on the ice. We come to the spot where we started off early this morning. The ice in the fjord is worse, and Bruce will not risk leaving his motorboat in the bay. During the next two hours we drag the boat three kilometers over the wet and slushy fjord ice to the harbour.

It is hard work and it is getting hot under the afternoon sun. Perspiring and breathless we struggle with the heavy boat.

"Lucky I don't have to make a living this way" I think.

In the evening of Good Friday I visit the Troake family, with a bottle of whisky and a bottle of local rum. There are three generations of seal hunters in the Troake family: old Captain Peter Troake - he is 76 - his son Jack Troake, skipper of the longliner "Lone Fisher" and his son Gary who is in his mid-twenties and sails in his father's boat like his older brother. There is also Chess Coish, skipper of the "Annie Cordell".

All are active members of the "Sealers Association", and a heated discussion follows. They are fed up that their views are always presented in a distorted fashion and they are

especially fed up to be presented by the world press as primitve barbarians. They are fed up and angry and worried and feel their livelihood threatened. "That you dare visit us here!" says Jack Troake sarcastically. "Aren't you afraid that you might get killed? Don't you know that we are described as brutal baby killers and stone age people?"...

"Some journalists come here believing quite seriously that we are living in some sort of Stone Age community here. What can one say to that? Stay away! Don't get involved in this! We like living here even though we do not make more than $ 12,000.00 a year. We can do as we please. Stay away and don't interfere with our lives!"

That has changed now.

They have lost one third of their annual income because they cannot sell the pelts anymore. Corino will only buy 60,000 pelts and will pay no more than $ 16.00 a piece. This is half the price that they received before, before the ban on imports by the EEC of products made from the skins of young seals.

Why should they be affected by this? They always caught beaters, the young seals. The large ships from St.Johns and Norway caught the white seal pups. Not the local fishermen.

Furthermore, their hunting licence explicitly prohibits them from catching seal pups. What are they to do? asks Jack Troake. "Everybody says to us: you are not allowed to catch seals, you are not allowed to catch herring, you

are not allowed to catch salmon. What are we supposed to do? ...We fish cod, but we might as well give it away. Prices have not gone up since 1976, and we have a seal population of about three million. We livewith the animals. We know them and we are not allowed to catch them!"

All because of Greenpeace.

They have lost their fight against the environmentalists. I explain to them that they can do nothing against the impression which the pictures of the slaughter of the little baby seals had on people. They look just like cuddly toy animals. I myself have been influenced and am continuously trying to make the distinction between the slaughter of the seal pups and the killing of younger and older seals.

They already know that.

All the same, it is their existence, their livelihood. "And why are only the young seal pups too cute?"asks old Troake. "What about a little lamb or a calf or a cute little chick?"

Yes, why the seal of all the animals? Why not a little lamb? Why is the seal made into something special? All animals are beautiful. Why is the seal made into something different from other animals?

"But chicks are not as cute", says I, whilst I slowly begin to understand the difference between my and their concept of nature. I continue to explain the difference between a chick and a seal pup. In their mind there is no difference, in my mind the difference is immeasurable. I

think that the chick is not a wild animal, it does not really form part of the wildlife. For a city dweller the chick is almost a part of the food industry, like milk and cheese. It is not a part of wildlife. The seal, on the other hand, is a part of wildlife, and it is in the process of becoming extinct, and that is the reason why city dwellers are worried. I realize that our relationship with nature is oversimplified and romanti-zised.

We try to protect it, as if it were a part of us which is in the process of dying off. Nature, which we know so well from TV and Walt Disney's animal films. A nice thought. "And this has to happen to us", retort the fishermen. "It's Greenpeace's fault!" says old Troake. "They should never have been allowed to take photographs of the seal pups on the ice. We saw it coming. In those days they were sent back to shore when a camera was found in their sea-bag. We knew then what would happen. The first person who was out there to photograph seal pups was an English doctor and that was even be-fore the war. It was he who came back and said:"They are so innocent. You cannot kill them!"

For the fishermen, the seal is a part of the whole, just like the whale and the fish and the elk and the reindeer and the lamb and the calf and the chick and the pig.

Even though I cannot stand the sight of the dead seals I begin to realize more and more that the whole problem has been distorted and oversimplified and has been used for publicity purposes which are solely aimed at people's emotions. Who can

feel anything but disgust when looking at a small helpless animal whose skull is being crushed by a blow of a club? The fishermen understand and many are actually quite happy that the slaughter has ended.

"And that's what it was, a slaughter under the open sky. Red blood on white ice under a blue sky", says Jack Troake.

But it was their livelihood. They do not regret that the slaughter of the seal pups has ended. They only regret that the hunt for young seals has also come to an end. It is Gary, the youngest of the Troake family, who dissociates himself the most from the slaughter of the seal pups. He could never get used to the killing and he thinks it is a good thing that it has ended, maybe, because he himself has two small children and remembers their mother nursing them.

It is all right to kill young seals. They are able to go into the water, they have to fend for themselves and probably cannot even remember their mother. To kill them with a rifle, that is hunting. The other thing had nothing to do with hunting. The seal pup was just lying there, unable to escape. Often, the afterbirth was lying right beside it. Sometimes, there was still milk in its stomach when he opened it up. It was as if one was destroying a family. Gary Troake.

One can discuss it endlessly. For or against the slaughter of the young seals. Hunt versus slaughter. Humane methods of killing versus inhumane.

In Newfoundland, in the Spring, the seals used to come by the thousands with the ice to the coast, and people were

starving after the long Winter. But out there, on the ice, there were thousands of seals, barking, ready to be slaughtered and eaten, the pelts were used, oil was made from the fat. For more than 400 years seals have been hunted in Newfoundland. There were more than enough seals, why should they be left out there, useless?

Then, many years of indiscriminate killing followed, in the fifties and the sixties, when even helicopters were used to reach herds which were not easy to get at. The greed of the trading companies and the fur companies predominated and the population of Greenland seals and hooded seals diminished rapidly and was perhaps even threatened with extinction.

This is not the case anymore.

During the mid-sixties marine biologists and public opinion began to take an interest in the slaughter of the seal pups, and in 1971 the Canadian Government introduced the first Seal Protection Regulations: it limited and controlled the slaughter to a maximum of 250,000 seal pups per year.

It was thought that the seal population could absorb this number.

This was in 1971.

Greenpeace did not begin to get interested in the baby seals until 1976 when they started their campaign, but it was not the Greenpeace people who finally enforced the Seal Protection Regulations and the limitation of the killing of the seals, it was the Canadian Government which had introduced this legislation five years previously.

As a matter of record the fur of the baby seal is white and similar to rabbit skin, only the hairs are somewhat longer and stiffer. The fur is hardly ever used in its original colour, only for fur jackets, as they are sold especially in Italy and in France. Otherwise, the skin of the seal pups is dyed: brown, grey, black. Many people with a social conscience and an environmental awareness are probably wearing a winter coat with a brown collar made from the fur of a baby seal, or with a nice warm lining, because it is not so easy to be an animal lover and a humanitarian at one and the same time.

Chess Coish is angry, his voice is hard.

"How is it in Europe? Is there still any wild nature left? Are there still any wild animals?"

"Hardly any", I answer.

"Here, there are still large numbers of reindeer, seals, whales. Is this not proof that it is you who have violated nature, not us?"

He is angry. Maybe these well-meaning Greenpeace people have the right to protest, but he doubts their right to prevent him from making a living.

Does anybody have this right in a democracy?

Why can people in Europe not decide for themselves whether they want to buy sealskins or not? Why does there have to be an import ban on sealskins? Is it not the democratic right of people to determine for themselves whether they want to buy or not? But this is not all. There is more. The problem goes deeper. There are people whose aim it is to

undermine the democratic system. You and people like you, journalists, you would not understand it at all, but there are many people who are jealous of our way of life. That is why they want to destroy it...

You have destroyed your wildlife, we still have ours. The seal population is steadily increasing. If it were really true that we are barbarians, as it is alleged, the opposite can be proved right here...

We still have a rich wildlife. You do not have that! Who, then, are the barbarians?

It is easier to drag the motorboat across the morning ice which is crunchy-hard and frozen flat. In the afternoon the ice will become mushy and heavy and wet. Everybody is perspiring, quiet, and blows up at the slightest provocation.

After a long winter of doing nothing, Spring begins. At 2.30 a.m. the fishermen get up, drag their motorboats to the black open water in the ice and wait out there, for 16 hours, day in and day out, until the seals surface for air. Early this morning I am out there at the open water, where it was full of seals yesterday, with Lloyd Blackler, his father, his older brother and a friend, David.

The sun is slowly rising and it promises to be a nice day, and we listen to the silence, or:"Damn little silence here", remarks Lloyd's older brother. "It sounds rather like the Vietnam war!"

Narrator:

It sounds as if seals are being shot everywhere but here, where we are standing. There is a continuous roar of motorboats and of many rifles out there, near the larger waterholes in the North, and after we have been waiting for about two hours, Lloyd begins to lose his patience...

"Damn, we might as well go back!" he shouts to David who is standing on the other side of the open water. "And this is supposed to be a very good spot. Yesterday we shot two seals here".

They are waiting and listening to the shots in the distance.

"They must have shot at least eight to ten seals out there". Lloyd continues:"Yesterday, there were lots of seals here".

"Really?" says David.

"Everywhere their heads came out of the water but we only arrived after the best was over... ...The others who were here didn't have a motorboat and therefore didn't want to shoot, but they poked their heads out of the water everywhere".

David would not mind if they were doing it now, too.

"You should have seen it yesterday", repeats Lloyd. "Yesterday there was no waiting. The others said if they had had the boat they could have killed at least 20"...

They wait, listening to the distant shots.

"We could really use an offshore wind", shouts Lloyd.

"There will be in July", answers David...

"Pardon?"

"Until July we'll have north-easterly winds!"

"Who says so?" shouts Lloyd.

"The meteorologists, in a long-range forecast".

"There must be at least 20 motorboats out there", says Lloyd.

Suddenly, his older brother makes a sign for us to be quiet.

There was one out there! A seal! Just now!

Running, he reaches the edge of the ice where he throws himself on his stomach and points his rifle. The silence is full of anticipation, until the seal lifts its head out of the water again, and he takes aim.

Then he fires.

During the morning we kill a total of four seals.

Around noon, the temperature on the ice has become almost subtropical. One quickly gets sunburnt, and everybody is wearing sunglasses to avoid snowblindness.

They are talking about going back. Only four seals in eight hours at the open water, and everywhere - except where we are - it still sounds like the Vietnam war.

Lloyd discovers the fifth seal as he is looking over his shoulder when relieving himself. There is an angry shout as he pulls up his pants in mid-stream, runs to his rifle, takes aim, just as the head of the seal dives, disappears.

"Damn it, did I have to piss right at this moment!" he shouts to the others...

"Damn it!"

On the way back David breaks through the ice with his left leg, up to his thigh. Lloyd and I had just trekked over the same spot. Directly in my footstep David broke through with his leg. He is standing on one foot, shivering, screaming with cold, leaning on a boathook and emptying his rubber boot.

"Damn it, one should be able to walk on water!" remarks old Blackler blasphemously. Luckily it is not quite as bad as Bruce Legge's brother Joe who, a few days ago, fell into the water. Lloyd's voice becomes suddenly urgent when he begins to talk about it. Joe Legge had been in the water long enough to get the feeling that he was on the point of dozing off.
"Lost his rifle", says old Blackler.
"Lost his rifle", repeats Lloyd. "It was as if he was going to sleep, but just before, he managed to put his foot on some sort of a ledge under water, and he came out, crying out loud and having lost his boots".
"And his rifle", repeats old Blackler.
"And his rifle", repeats Lloyd. "He told me that he almost gave up, but then he asked God for help and after that, he somehow felt a great peace and then he managed to get out of the water".

We leave the ice, drag the heavy motorboat across the slushy surface ice. Behind us the ice is spotted by what we left behind: plastic bags, empty shells, food leftovers, Coca-Cola bottles, yellow patches of men's piss and some oxide-red seal blood.

"It is the worst Winter in 10 years" say the fishermen.

They need offshore wind and want to go out with their longliners. 700 seals would be enough for economic survival. The thought of all the seals out there is unbearable. The coastguard is bringing in new reports of seal herds. Recently a large herd was sighted at Greenbay. It was like a long black snake, a 20 mile long snake, black with seals. Further south a herd, nine miles long and three miles wide, has been seen, and the largest herd, 25 miles long and 9 miles wide.

Usually the fishermen go out to several herds in the floe ice. If a longliner is frozen in the ice there is always another one nearby to help. Usually, the Troakes go together with Stratt Brown and his son Heywood on the cutter "Gloria Louise". The Browns belong to the Pentecostal denomination and are not allowed to do anything on a Sunday, not even fish or hunt seals, even when they came across a large seal herd on a Sunday morning last year when they were on their way into the harbour.

"They were a stone's throw away", remembers Stratt. The Troakes shot 56 seals that morning but Stratt continued straight towards the harbour. "You must have lost thousands of dollars because of your religion" says Gary Troake...

"Of course, but that was a temptation", says Stratt, "God wanted to test us and led us into temptation".

Never mind what may happen, Stratt will not desecrate the sabbath. The only way to avoid temptation was to leave,

which he did, and quickly.

Stratt's son Heywood was a bit annoyed about it all. They could have used the money. "On the other hand", he adds, "Troakes had 50 bad skins in their catch, skins for which they only received one dollar each. Skins with loose hair, skins of moulting seals".

He does not say whether they were the 50 seals which the Troakes caught that Sunday. He only says that they had 50 skins for which they received only one dollar. They smirk a little.

It is May 6th and I have to leave again. During the last few days a strong onshore wind has been blowing, but today there is almost no wind and bright sunshine on Longpoint.

The coast is blocked by masses of ice, just like three weeks ago, when I arrived. The ice is piled up even higher, and the narrow black waterholes are slowly closing in completely. Only the most eager of the fishermen are still standing on the coast on the nearest waterhole, waiting for seals of which there are less and less.

There are good years and bad years. The last few years have been bad. The season is almost finished, the seals are beginning to move north, to Greenland, their summer migration, and the catch appears to be bad.

But life has always been hard here. If people did not have their religion they would either become alcoholics or insane. Many do so anyway, either one or the other, surprisingly

many, compared to the national average. Many, even non-believers think it is good that people become victims of the Salvation Army or the Pentecostal movement, instead of madness or alcohol.

Just as the faith is strict under the soft surface, morals are also strict. Birth control is frowned upon, but practised secretly by those who are better off, otherwise it is God's will, as in grandmother's time, and 14 year-old girls still get pregnant without knowing how it happened.

And nobody has told them how they could have prevented it. God's will and the weather gods rule.

All in all, it is a society which is easily hurt and never really able to defend itself against the accusations of the outside world.

But today, the weather is good and beyond Longpoint the ice lies under a blue sky. A motorboat is breaking through the thin night ice. A bird is singing. The fishermen arrive, gaze across the ice, talk about the weather.
My God, what a beautiful day!

Not a single fisherman managed to get to the seal hunt this year.

The ice did not drift off the coast until the end of May.

The Corino fur company announced that they bought about 27,000 sealskins, with the quota set at 60,000.

THE END